AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF SIR JOHN HENRY LEFROY, C.B., K.C.M.G., F.R.S., etc.

Colonel Commandant Royal Artillery

Edited by

Lady Lefroy

Printed For
Private Circulation Only.

Pages 95-99. (1844)

I only remained long enough at Fort Chipewyan on this occasion to repeat my observations of last autumn, and left it on 4th July. I had made up my mind that it was possible to ascend Peace River as far as Dunvegan, cross the plains to Edmonton and reach Canada before the closing navigation, and so indeed it proved, but it was a very close thing. This noble stream, one of the main arteries of the continent, and chief feeder of the Mackenzie, which takes its rise in the Rocky Mountains, was at this time almost unknown to geographical science, and I confess that a desire to be the first scientific traveller to visit it had much to do with my decision, and I took unusual pains to make a track survey as well as to describe its features from day to day. The unfortunate loss of my journals in 1846 deprived me of nearly all the fruit of this labour.

Peace River, although 5° or 6° of latitude north of the Saskatchewan, presensts more luxuriant vegetation, and many of the characteristics of milder climate. I cannot speak with statistical precision, not having at hand the observation made of late years, but I believe it has actually been found a more fertile region. Out progress was slow against the stream, but as there is only one portage at the Falls, and

I was anxious to push on and could not afford long halts, I did not make many observations.

I found a genial, simple-minded trader in charge of Fort Vermillion, afterwards, I do not know when, renamed Fort Lefroy. He had a large family; one of his little girls said something to him in "Cree", and he turned to me with the inquiry, "Do you know what she said?" 'I never loved a chief before, but I love him mah-ne-maga, above anything!'" showing an idyllic simplicity rare in this age.

Indians are not numerous on Peace River. They are a Chipewyan tribe, called the Beaver Indians by the traders, and held in great respect. I heard a touching anecdote of a poor mother who had lost her infant. In her wild despair and darkness she cut off her own breast, placed it on the cold lips of the child and hanged herself.

I reached Fort Dunvegan, my furtherest point on this river, on 22nd July, and for the first time fixed its geographical position, which had fluctuated between longitude 7° 30′ W. and 8° 52′ W. Thirty nine years afterwards, Mr. F. King, of the Dominion Survey, repeated the determination, and I take some satisfaction in his confirmation:

	(Latitude.)		
Lefroy, 1844 . . .	55° 55′ 36″	118° 40′ 45″ W.	(By Lunars.)
King, 1883	55° 55′ 38″	118° 36′ 1″ W.	

I stayed here four days, one of which was kept as a term day. The trader was a brother of my companion at Fort Chippewyan, Mr. Dyke Bouchier; he was married to a half-breed Indian woman. Nothing could exceed their hospitality.

Peace River runs here in a deep narrow valley at a depth of 400 feet. which it has apparently cut for itself. The neighborhood is well wooded, and was even then known to offer beds of coal, which I found

cropping out on the side of a ravine; it was not of good quality. I expected to find the Rocky Mountains in view here, but such was not the case. The rise of the great plains towards the base of the mountains is so gradual that they are not seen until they are nearly approached.

We took our leave on 26th July, and I was much interested to see my men, each cap in hand, and with the manners of a courtier, respectfully approach Mrs. Bouchair and the other half-breed woman, and one after another bid these ladies farewell with a kiss.

Having to cross the plains to Edmonton, I left my canoe here, and crossed the river. A drove of half-wild horses were in waiting on the further side with a few Indians, half-breeds, and their wives, who wished to accompany us. These women all ride astride, and I was much struck with the comfort and perfect modesty of the arrangement. Saddles are unknown; the substitute is a cusion made of a number of small skins; the bridle is a cord round the animal's lower jaw.

Smoky River, which we crosses on the third day, takes its name from a solfatara higher up, which I visited at this spot, called "The Smokers". There are a number of crevices lined with small crystals of sulphur, which are always emitting smoke. It will doubtless at no distant day be a health resort. I saw no signs of volcanic activity. The small lakes in the neighborhood are horribly impregnated with sulphuretted hydrogen. It rained all the time, and I was truly glad to get back to camp at a late hour after dark. Riding behind our Indian guides, I was much reminded of the moss troopers of the Scotish border as we pricked on without drawing bridle, or looking to see

who followed, through swamps and thickets hour after hour.

We reached the fort on Lesser Slave Lake a little before noon on August 2nd. The gentleman in charge had had no notice of my coming, but fortunately there was no lack of provisions at the station, and he made us very welcome.

Here I stayed until the 5th, and fixed its geographical position, which was previously very uncertain.

The scenery about Lesser Slave Lake is uninteresting, but improves towards the eastern end, where the lake drains into the Athabasca River. I was very fortunate in finding a canoe at the firt, and in crossing the lake on the 6th we had the rare good fortune to overtake and kill a moose, which was swimming across it -- one of whose great cleft hoofs I still possess. Some Indians appeared afterwards and claimed a share, as they declared they had driven it into the water. I do not doubt that this was true, and we acted liberally in giving them the greater part of it.

We reached Fort Assiniboine on the 10th, not making more than twenty miles progress a day against a very strong current. I have but an indistinct recollection of it. Here I found a young Wesleyan minister, named Rundle, who was waiting, with his interpreter, for an escort to Edmonton, and asked permission to join my party. A scene I can never forget was the crossing of this river, thus described in a letter to my sister Isabella:

"It is a tremendously rapid river. We passed over the baggage in a log canoe. Then we had to get the horses across -- wild animals not backed for months; never shod or trimmed, tails, manes, and forelocks as wild as you can conceive. There was a steep bank which we drove

them down, and one by one forced them to plunge in, some of them rearing, trembling, and trying by all possible means to escape. There was an Indian woman, with her long black hair streaming behind her, brandishing a long stick, with all the dogs in excitement, and the Indian lads shouting at them, 'Ho! ho! hurrah!' until they were all in. Once in the water they sank until little but their heads were visible. They swam across in groups, and were carried a long way down by the current. I rode one of these animals one hundred miles with nothing but a thong tied to his lower jaw. Though imperfectly broken in, all these horses are good-tempered, and quite free from vice, and much more easy to manage than our own. They are terribly persecuted by the wolves. At Edmonton, where they are obliged to keep them in the woods, and at a distance to prevent their being stolen by the Blackfeet, from one hundred to two hundred are lost every year."

I left Fort Assiniboine on the 12th August, and two days after had my own first experience in swimming a horse over a river, which gives a somewhat peculiar sensation. I was surprised at the depth to which I sank -- up to the waist, the gorse's body nearly perpendicular; but the motion was easy, and it appeared to be no great exertion to the horse. My travelling companion liked the looks of it so little, however, that after crossing I had to return to bring him over. On this occasion we made a raft to get the baggage across. Poor William, the missionary's interpreter, got into sad disgrace, culminating in a few strokes with the whip, for letting his employer's baggage horse get a bad sore. Many of the horses had frightful sores such as I never have seen before or since. All that was done was to shift the load to another horse.

I found Mr. Rundle a good little man, very young and inexperienced, and of no obvious fitness for his calling, and very ignorant. I thought to introduce Kelbe's "Christian Year" to him, but he shook his head over the passage in the poem for Communion of the Sick --

"Where shall we learn that gentle spell?
Mother of martyrs, thou canst tell."

and I found that by "mother of martyrs" he understood the Blessed Virgin.

He greatly felt and lamented his own exclusion from church privileges, and asked my opinion of the propriety of administering the Hold Communion to himself alone.

I took an opportunity at one of our camps to put his interpreter, who was a boy of, I suppose, not over fourteen, to a test as to his capacity. I gave him a passage of a few lines taken out of an easy part of one of the "Articles of Religion" to translate into Cree. Two or three days later I gave him his translation to put back into English. He did better than I expected, and certainly reproduced the sense, if not the language.

I was received by Mr. Rowand, widely known among the Plain Indians as the "Big Mountain"; he was a powerful, but not very tall man of rough, determined aspect, and very lame from an early accident. Hunting alone as a young man he had been thrown from his horse and had broken his leg. By some means intelligence reached the fort of what had occurred, and before the whites could do anything an Indian girl mounted and galloped off in the direction indicated. She found him, nurses him and saved his life, and he married her. She was a middle-aged woman when I saw her. Years afterwards I met their son, a doctor, in Quebec.

Rowand's authority among the Blackfeet tribes was such that I should not have hesitated to accept the safe conduct he offered me, to make a little tour to the South Saskatchewan under the guidance of one of the chiefs, but for two reasons -- one was that time did not permit it, the other was of a totally different nature. There still existed a form of hospitality among them characteristic of the most primitive races, and which, when Lewis and Clarke for the first time crossed the continent in 1805 was universal west of the Mississippi. The ethnologist will know to whiat I allude[1]; I did not wish to encounter it. Christian instruction, which has now reached even the Blackfeet, and closer intercourse with a more advanced race, have caused this barbarism to disappear.

I left Edmonton on the evening of August 19th, in a small barge provided by Mr. Rowand, and as the Indians on the plains were at that time in a state of ferment, he supplied me with muskets and ammunintion for the crew. He advised me also to avoid observation and travel as much as possible by night for though it could not be said that the hostility of the Indians were directed against the whites, a white scalp is as good as another, indeed better; and an unsuccessful war party led by a reckless young chief would probably not be at all particular. This gave a spice of adventure to the next few days' journey, which was an agreeable change from its usual tameness. The first night I took the helm, as were merely drifted with the durrent, and there was nothing to do but to keep the boat in the stream. I startled the men who were sleeping, nearly out of their senses by firing at a couple of elk which

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1. Foeminas marti filce se ipsas in usum hospitum cedebant.

which came down to drink. However, we had no adventure for some days. We never slept on shore, but looked out some secluded spot to land twice a day for breakfast and supper, where our smoke was not likely to be observed. We reached Fort Pitt on the evening of the 21st.

(Book borrowed from Mrs. R. Lefroy, October, 1943.)